Good Sleeping Weather

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The first night at my mother-in-law's house you never got much sleep, but that was all right with us. I myself enjoyed lying with my husband, being held by him in a bed where it didn't matter a bit that we might be all wrong for each other. It didn't matter that the room was crammed with every bit of furniture and hat box and garment bag that was not in use and mostly had not been for quite some years. On the whole, I found it a peaceful place, restful, and I liked to visit, especially to have the chance to talk with my mother-in-law during the day and eat her very good food and argue a little about who would do the dishes.

Bedtime was pretty early, but you couldn't get to sleep too readily because the pigs ate throughout the night. They got at their feed by shoving their noses up under the metal lids of the pig feeder, fashioned as a connection of seven or eight "stations" from which food was released down a central circular tower, which saved, I presume, both on waste and the number of times one had to fill up the trough with feed. When a pig finished, the feeder section would slam shut, waking up other pigs who would feed in their turn. I don't know if they actually fed through the night or if it only seemed that way. But despite the pigs, nights in that room were restful and smelled good; the scent in the bedroom that particular one of attics filled with objects throwing off aromas of by-gone utility and promise, twenty- or thirty- or fifty-year artifacts waiting to be useful again.

It was odd that here my husband could sleep in and I was the one who ticked off the half-hours and quarter-hours until it was late enough in the early morning to feel my way past the bureaus and boxes and cabinets of the bedroom to the small landing where my husband's father had never put in a railing to keep anyone from pitching over on to the stairs, where he had never managed to put in a hand rail for the steps. If you knew enough to walk around the ten-pound bag of sugar or flour that my mother-in-law kept on the bottom, though, you'd make it down to the stairwell door without too much noise, although the hinges were unoiled and the door hung inexactly in its frame. If you went down, you had to be sure you were ready to talk to whomever you might wake up.

I didn't particularly mind in general, but it was clear that if one encountered another person first thing in that house, it was ill-mannered to speak too much and equally so to walk into another room and leave him on his own. I confess it was the agony of conversation with my husband's father that first thing in the morning that was painful to me and that I sought to avoid. He had a way of filling up a room, and his invariable response to any subject I might propose, from, "Boy, I sure slept well last night," to "I see you have quite a number of pigs at the moment" was, "Oh?" a word that over the years I learned could mean anything from, "Yes, that is quite interesting, isn't it?" to, "The inanity of your observations defies description." I knew the fault was in me, that I was the outsider, that I just didn't know what good manners were in that house, that I tried too hard to please.

In the late 1980s the only animals on the farm were pigs and beef cattle, which followed seasons of fattening and slaughter I had almost no sense of. I always wanted to walk down and look at the steer (which I still called cows), but my husband's brother, John, who lived at home and worked the farm, said I would likely spook them, and, having spooked a bull on the property of a monastery not too long previously, I at least knew this was something one did not want to do. I didn't mind the smell of cows, and I liked the smell of horses and chickens, the smell of manure in hay, but there had not been horses by then for a long time, and no more chickens, and no more milk cows since my husband had been in high school. The smell of pigs, with the yard right upwind to the back of the house from the pig yard, was horrible. My mother-in-law was allergic to sheep and could not easily digest pork, and would often have to keep the kitchen window closed in the most stultifying of heat, but no one was foolish enough to suggest a solution.

My in-laws had moved from Westphalia, Iowa, where my mother-in-law was from, some five miles to Earling where they had bought this farm in the 1940s. They raised ten children to adulthood in that house, and three of them were or had married farmers, but the rest lived close enough to visit at least once or twice a year, and several, like my husband and me, tried to go up every couple of months or so. The last time we visited, he and I had been responsible for the death by front tire well of my father-in-law's last dog, who could not be convinced to stay behind when we went out for a walk on the highway. It didn't take more than the first passing car to send him flying up in the air to his reward. He had been tossed straight into the ditch, where he clearly lay in death but both of us wished he somehow could get a do-over. When we slunk back, meeting my father-in-law in the living room, where he sat where he always sat when he wasn't taking a nap, and told him, "The dog got run over when we went out for a walk," he only said, "Oh?" The rest of the weekend, he talked about nothing but the dog, but not to us.

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This morning as I eased open the creaking stairwell door, I could see the plaster-and-velvet-coated blood hound sitting upright by the front door, the one that my husband's oldest sister had bought so that their father would at last not get any more live dogs, who had in fact all come to early and similar ends. I turned from the still living room, my in-laws' bedroom door closed tight and no sounds from anyone about, into the kitchen and from there to the only bathroom in the house. I sniffed the pink Dove that lay in its own melted soup like a dead thing in the recessed soap drain of the sink, looked out the window to see the aluminum top of the pig feeder, around which all of the pigs appeared to be in a deep sleep, but, somehow, the feeder lids still clanking every once in a slow while. I wondered how long we might have to stay this morning, how soon we might reasonably get away. I used the toilet, washed my hands, and opened the bathroom door to find my husband's father already seated at the kitchen table.

He shoved a section of newspaper and a coffee cup at a chair not quite next to him, and I sat down, and took them both. The kitchen was cold in the morning. Normally my mother-in-law would be standing by the stove, making eggs or oatmeal, ready to speak, but she was not in the room and I did not dare ask, "Where's Ma?" I wondered if I could rationalize going back upstairs, or for a walk down to look at the cemetery, or really anything other than continue to sit, and recognized that anything short of staying, silent and subordinate, was out of the question. We stayed there for I think over an hour, but it might have been less. In that time, he did not look at me or speak, other than to reply to my desperate stab at conference, "Well, I really just slept so good up there. That was good sleeping weather last night, wasn't it?" to which he inevitably replied, "Oh?"

By the time my husband came down, his mother had returned from wherever she had escaped to and was making eggs and oatmeal. My father-in-law and I were still turning over the newspaper, though I had read it something like three times entirely by then. My husband stretched, and yawned, satisfied and sleek as a dog. He could not have looked happier or more at home.

"Man, I slept good," he said. "Jayze, that was good sleeping weather!"

His father looked up at him and replied, "Yah, it sure was!"

I looked up at him with fire in my eyes, which he did not see, and then dropped them back down to the newspaper.

"Oh?" I said.